

NAME-CHANGING—AND WHAT IT GETS YOU

Twenty-Five Who Did It

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MANY Jews in the United States like neither their names nor their faces, and many take surgical steps to have them corrected. There are no available statistics on plastic-surgery nose operations. But there are rough statistics on applicants to state courts to change family names: about 50,000 a year. Of these, around 80 per cent are Jews; thus, estimating four persons to a family, 160,000 shed or modify their Jewish cognomens annually.

State courts make little fuss about granting applications for changes of name unless the applicant is a notorious criminal. The process is a simple one. An affidavit swearing to hardship under the burden of the name is attached to an order, the order is submitted to a judge who almost never asks to see the applicant, and the relief is granted.

But only a very small percentage of all such applications are based on obvious hardship. A younger brother of Al Capone asks for permission to call himself Rayola; the relatives of a wholesale murderer similarly

request and are granted permission to change their name. One can also appreciate why twenty-seven persons named Hitler felt it necessary to change their names, and perhaps one can understand the patriotic motives which during the First World War led the Battenbergs, relatives of the British royal family, to change their name to Mountbatten. With Jews, and other "minority groups," the matter is more complex.

ALMOST half the Jews who change their names are content with a simple shortening: Levenstein to Levin; Rubinstein to Rubin; Rabinowitz to Rabin; Myrowitz to Myron; Gluckenspiegel to Gluck. No effort to hide their Jewishness here—simple convenience might explain the matter: the shorter name is easier to spell over the phone and fits comfortably on any dotted line. But one suspects conformity, too: are people named Throckmorton or Hollingsworth quite so ready to cut out a syllable?

What of the near 60 per cent who go in for more drastic alterations; who reach for the niftier names, such as Pierce, Stanfield, Dean, Hadley, Holmes; or retreat into the obscurity of Brown, Baker, Jones, Lewis, Smith? Whether they choose fancy or flat, it is an odd kind of thing to do in America. Understandable in xenophobic France or homogeneous England that someone with an outlandish name should want to lose his "foreignness." But in the polyglot United States alien names, like alien origin, are almost as much the rule as the exception, as a glance at the telephone book, a list of the honored war dead, names on a good football team, or a list of contributors to the Red Cross will show.

But apparently many Jews find such considerations of little weight compared to the

WE ALL know someone who has grown tired of his "outlandish" and "Jewish" surname and tried to make life easier by shortening or "Americanizing" it. Do the name-changers get what they want? J. ALVIN KUGELMASS asked this question of a random group of Jews who had changed their names, and reports here the perhaps surprising response. Mr. Kugelmass is the author of a biography of Louis Braille, and a book of his about Ralph J. Bunche will appear late this year. He has worked as a copy editor and reporter on various leading newspapers, and as a foreign correspondent. He was born in New York City in 1910, and attended Columbia University. Mr. Kugelmass's interest in the present subject was to some degree stimulated by questions suffered by him as to why he did not do something about his own "cumbersome handle," which somehow he has never felt any desire to change.

felt burden of their Jewish label. Look at the record: Half the Jews in the armed forces during World War II bore non-Jewish last names, it is asserted in an article in *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*. To Jewish chaplains—I spoke to a dozen of them—it was a commonplace for Private Jones or Sergeant Lewis to help in the distribution of *yarmelkas* before services, it was routine for them to write home to Momma and Poppa Osborne when son Louis was killed or wounded. Or, to take the testimony of a lieutenant colonel of the Graves Registration Command: "We soon became accustomed to placing stars over graves of GI's with an H on their dog tags but with the most un-Jewish names you can imagine." As an afterthought, he added: "I'll bet a lot of anti-Semites would be disturbed to find how many Jews with non-Jewish names hold the most coveted medals. You might have a good story in that all by itself." I myself have seen innumerable soldiers' graves in France where the Star of David stands marked with such names as Franklin, Johnson, Hamil, Sheppard.

Why do they do it—and what do they achieve by it? In an effort to find out, I selected at random from court files in New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles twenty-five individuals whose owners had for more than a year sported drastically changed (not merely abbreviated) names. The geographic distribution may not have been of the best for an over-all view, but at least it spanned the nation. Small-town Jews, I should have mentioned, don't seem to go in for name-changing; whether it's because they don't care or they feel they couldn't get away with it, there is no way of knowing.

The twenty-five selected were sent the following questionnaire:

1. Why did you change your name?
2. Was it social or economic pressure?
3. What is your occupation and your economic level? Is it over or under \$5,000 a year?
4. Did your wife press you to change your

name? Did she resist or encourage the change?

5. Now that you have a new name for about a year,

(a) Do you observe any marked change in your economic and social life? What change, if any?

(b) What is the attitude of Gentiles to you and your new name?

(c) What is the attitude of Jews and relatives to you and your new name?

6. Are you pleased with the results or do you wish you had your old name back?

A COVERING letter assured the recipient that his anonymity would be preserved, offered references as to the writer's integrity, and urged the subject to write as fully and freely as he wished.

No one answered. Either the letter and the questionnaire were tactless or the name-changers highly sensitive. I incline to the latter view.

Pollsters frequently get better returns by using the phone. So I developed a further list of twenty-five names within local or limited long-distance radius. These twenty-five included physicians and dentists (who are the most enthusiastic name-changers), teachers, salesmen, office executives, pharmacists, photographers, an army officer, a civil service worker, a defense worker, and an engineer.

There seem to be few persons in the so-called menial or laboring classes and occupations among Jews who change their names. A check with labor unions which have a high membership of Jews, such as the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, and the Furriers Joint Council of New York, showed that no rank-and-file member has asked for a new card under a new name, at least not in the past ten or fifteen years. To check further, calls to lodges such as the Masons, Knights of Pythias, Odd Fellows, and other fraternal and benevolent orders where Jewish membership is high, revealed that the only Jews who

asked for membership cards under new names belonged to white-collar occupations. The circulation departments of three Yiddish newspapers in New York and one in Boston said that they do not recall a change of name among their mail subscribers within the past twenty years. These were informal responses made without checking of files, yet they can probably be taken as correct.

THE second list of twenty-five subjects included people who lived and worked in New York State, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania. Within a week, making night calls to catch the husbands at home, I had completed the interviews: where the first twenty-five had maintained an apparently resentful silence, all of the second group spoke freely once the awkward preliminaries had been got over. Perhaps the cold questionnaire sent to the first twenty-five deserved their cold silence.

The second group not only spoke easily, but were eager to volunteer information and to go into gratuitous detail. There was in most cases a veritable rush of words, the telephone calls seeming to operate as opportunity for a kind of confession. That there was indeed a heavy sense of guilt in each case could be seen in the eagerness with which the respondents sought to prove they were "still Jews"; in no case could I sense even the remotest inkling of a wish to abandon their Jewishness.

Yet in each case, the choice of a distinctly "Gentile" name seemed evidence that there had been some impulse towards concealment of Jewishness. Perhaps if that impulse had been successfully carried through, the sense of guilt might not have been so obvious; and the subjects might not have been so anxious to explain, to apologize, to make little of it. Perhaps if the change of name had done the job it promised to do, if there had actually been a new life after the change, the subjects would not have been willing to talk at all. But life had not changed, and one sensed a certain frustration that demanded expression.

Without exception, all twenty-five said that they had been fools. Since the names

had been selected at random as one might stick a hatpin into the pages of a telephone book, this unanimity is a most impressive fact. Never in my experience as a newspaperman have twenty-five persons, questioned by phone on any subject, shown such agreement. The phrase used in nineteen of the twenty-five conversations was: "I was a damned fool." The other six said: "I am sorry I did it."

The change of name from, let us say, Schwartz to Seward (there is no reference here to actual persons), brought no happiness, no change of luck, no increase in income, no broader social horizons or easier acceptance or enhanced status. None had moved to a different city: Jews who change their names are for the most part established people, earning good incomes where they are, and, as success is measured, they are successful where they are. They have invested their lives in achieving what they possess, and to move would mean to begin all over again. Staying where they are, how could it make any real difference that Schwartz is called Seward? But obviously they had hoped it would.

TEN wives literally forced their husbands to relinquish the phone so that they could offer their reactions. Each admitted that the thing had been an adventure in betterment that had turned out badly. All toyed with the idea of going back to the old comfortable and familiar name, but all realized that they would not do so: it had been pointless to make the change and it would be pointless to retreat. "What's the use?" they said. "We'll stick it through and maybe it will help our children."

Eight of the ten wives said they had favored the change so as to get their children into medical school. But: "We're sorry now. If my son can't get into medical school because he's a Jew, then we'll send him to Scotland or to Paris. We shouldn't have started up the road of lying about our religion."

All of the twenty-five insisted that in changing their names and trying to conceal

their Jewish identities from the outside world, they had not meant to withdraw from the Jewish community. Eleven said they were not only members in good standing of congregations, but occupied active posts on their congregations' committees devoted to cultural or similar subsidiary activities. One bragged that he was chairman of the membership committee. The congregations they belong to are about evenly divided between Orthodox or Conservative and Reform.

In hoping to overcome a real or fancied anti-Semitism, it was obvious that they were seeking not so much to escape Jewishness completely as to live a dual existence in which their private lives would be Jewish but their exterior lives would be as smooth and even as they fancied the Gentiles'. Some hoped for profit, some for social advantage, some thought of their children's future. All had been sure it was possible to lead a dual existence—Jew at home, Gentile on the calling card. Five of the twenty-five were detached enough to recognize the similarity between themselves and the Marranos who lived as secret Jews under the Inquisition in Spain.

But what impelled them to call their lawyers and set the process in motion on the day they did, remains fuzzy. All had thought about it for years, but as something that should be done "sometime." All gave confused reasons as to why at a particular moment they felt the time had come, and in most cases it could be said that the actual decision was made on a plane far removed from reality. It will be simplest, perhaps, to illustrate what happened through a few "case histories." (Each case has been altered somewhat to prevent identification.)

DR. T., an obstetrician with a good practice in a large New Jersey city, earns upward of fifteen thousand a year, has a good car and a new home in the suburbs.

"For several years," he said, "since I went into practice, I've been trying to get a staff appointment at one of the hospitals. When I was turned down year after year, I wasn't impressed with the fact that they had a

Jewish doctor on the staff. I thought they were pointing to the lone Jew to prove that they weren't anti-Semitic. Many anti-Semitic organizations hire one Jew for that purpose. I was told that the bed capacity of the hospital simply did not permit an additional visiting obstetrician. I disbelieved them and hoped for the best when my name was changed. Perhaps then, I thought, even though they would know I was a Jew, they might not be so reluctant because the name on the published annual report would not disturb the Gentile contributors upon whom they count heavily."

No, he still hasn't received the appointment. And a less biased investigation which he made after the adoption of his new name convinced him that the hospital was indeed overstaffed and simply had no room for the patients he would bring in. Thus, he confessed, the "anti-Semitism" of the hospital administration had existed solely in his own imagination.

But he had still other reasons for changing his name. "My office is in a part-Jewish and part-Gentile district. I thought Gentile women had been staying away in droves. I found later that here too I had been brooding over an unreality, for my practice comes mainly from referrals and it so happens that Jewish women in my neighborhood mingle only with Jewish women and thus refer only Jewish women."

A third reason he gave, and this stemmed from the difficulties he had had in entering a medical school under the Jewish quota system, was his hopes for his son. "I want my boy to study medicine and I thought with a non-Jewish name he would stand a better chance." However, he admitted sadly that his son is aggrieved about his new name, is jeered at by his teen-age companions and classmates. "The whole thing was foolish and I'm a damned fool. I was running away from my Jewishness and there not only is nothing to run away from, but you can't outrun it no matter how hard you try."

Leon P., an engineer, works for a big firm and felt himself kept down because he is a Jew. "My salary wasn't bad at all. Engineers,

even Jewish ones, are in great demand these days, despite the long history of anti-Semitism in the field. But all about me, I fancied that I saw Gentiles getting promotions, both in title and salary, and naturally I thought of the obvious. So I oriented my name, quit my job, and went over to another company."

Within two months, he was called in by an executive of his new firm and given a handsome raise and topflight assignment. "So I told my wife: 'See, I was pretty smart for changing our name.'" But that very night he was called up by an executive of his old firm who naturally called him by his former name. The man said: "I am sorry you left us because we have something for you that's right up your alley." The engineer told him frankly that he had quit because he was sure that he had been discriminated against in advancement. His former boss was astonished: "That's not true. If you wish, I'll be glad to show you a file of interoffice correspondence on you which will prove that we were just waiting until the right project came along so that we could use you and boost you."

"I was a fool," said he. "The anti-Semitism was only in my head. Yes, I'm going back to my old firm but now I'm in a pickle because I wear a new name and I'll be embarrassed explaining it away."

A photographer, Morris F., felt that he was barred from a job with one of the big magazines because he was a Jew. He adopted a brand-new name with no remnants of the old one. "P.S.," he said, "and you can quote me on this: I still haven't got a job with a big magazine."

There is the civil service worker who felt that he was flunked out because he was a Jew when he took examinations for higher posts. There is the army officer who thought his superiors stood in his way because he was a Jew. "I began to feel like Dreyfus," he said laughingly. The civil service worker admitted that when he stopped brooding and began to take a realistic view, he realized that he had not passed the examinations because he was not trained to pass them: "I needed more courses in bookkeeping." The army officer

says the change of name "slays" him, as he puts it, at the post. "I'll never live it down. It's done me more harm than anything I can think of. Whether or not I get a promotion no longer matters. What matters is that my fellow officers think I'm a kind of a fool. If there is anti-Semitism in the Army, my change of name wouldn't have helped one bit, because in the records I'm down as a Jew. How incredibly blind and stupid of me. Then, too, there's a certain kind of 'honor-above-all' mind in the army which despises me because by changing my name I revealed that I was ashamed of my own people, as they would put it."

IN THEIR personal relations with friends, family, and neighbors, the name-changers have a dreadful time. Meeting relatives at weddings, Bar Mitzvahs, or funerals, they're given frosty and curious stares by many of the tribe who bear the old name. As one man told me: "There's a great curling of the lip that you might call a sneer. I always wanted to know what a sneer looks like. I know now."

From Gentile neighbors, friends, and business associates there is often open contempt, as though the Jew had been "found out." Favorite phrases are: "You can't rub it off, you know," or: "You still look like Glockenspiegel to me, even though you've changed the brand." The most disturbing reaction from Gentiles is the dreary and sustained habit of slapping the name-changer on the back and pretending to forget that he has a new name: "Well, if it isn't my old friend Bernstein!"

Interestingly, it is not the third-generation Jews (children of American-born parents), as one might suppose, who go in for name-changing. A check with the City College of New York, Brooklyn College, Queens College, Columbia University, New York University, Harvard graduate schools, Hunter College, and Brooklyn Polytechnic—where there are heavy enrollments of Jewish students—shows that no more than a handful of Jewish students inform the registrars of changes of name. Name-changing is prac-

ticed mainly by Jews now over thirty, mostly the children of immigrants.

In the opinion of county courthouse clerks, the rate of name-changing among Jews has gone up about 100 per cent since the close of the war. While Hitler was murdering Jews, the American Jew was sharply reminded of his identity and bore it with pride and a militant defiance. A plain-speaking theologian once said to me, "The Jews must be whipped every hundred years so that they do not lose their identity." While this latest whipping was going on, there was very little name-changing; since the end of the war, the rate has doubled. Perhaps, in the complex picture of Jewish "assimilation" in America, this too is partly Hitler's doing.

An interesting sidelight is the fact that almost no Jewish salesmen in the so-called "Jewish trades" change their names, even though they must in most cases go constantly beyond the confines of New York City into the "Gentile" hinterlands to earn their living. Jewish traveling salesmen (there are many thousands of them) find no discrimination in hotels across the land, and find no resistance to their wares because they are Jews—an interesting facet of the problem of economic discrimination against Jews.

WHATEVER the facts, however, there is no doubt that Jews widely believe in the existence of economic discrimination, especially in white-collar occupations and professions. All those I interviewed gave as their primary reason for changing their names the hope of economic betterment: a non-Jewish name, it was felt, would get that better job or expand the field of professional operations; secondarily, there was the hope that similar benefits might come to the children. In no case was there any concern—at least, any admitted concern—with such social gains as membership in restricted clubs, or acceptance at restricted resort hotels, or the ability to buy homes in restricted suburbs.

It is noteworthy that the change of name was followed in most cases by a greater and

more intense Jewish consciousness. The new name was merely a facade to gain a hoped-for advantage. Behind the facade, and with a special emphasis no doubt called forth by the complications following the change, the Jew finds himself all the more a Jew.

Since name-changers are people of good income, property, and affairs, their situation has a ludicrous side—in the endless technical difficulties that follow court approval of the new name. The name-changer must get as many as fifty certified copies of the order granting leave for change of name. These orders must be sent, with appropriate correspondence, to mortgage companies, banks, utility companies, motor vehicle bureaus, insurance companies, telephone companies; government agencies such as the Department of Internal Revenue, the Social Security Bureau, the Old-Age Pension Bureau, Selective Service, the Passport Department, etc., etc.; boards of elections, commissioners of jurors, attorneys handling wills, companies in which stocks and bonds are held; realty tax offices, water companies, post offices, charge and installment accounts, magazines, fraternal organizations, unions, professional associations; dog-license bureaus, professional licensing offices, charities. The list is endless. Modern man lives at the intersection of an endless number of contacts and associations. A change of name creates a flurry that threatens to go on forever. "It's enough," said my twenty-five, "to drive one to suicide." Each carries a wallet bulging with papers.

All twenty-five would like their old, comfortable names back, but they cannot face the fearful confusion that would follow.

SOMEHOW one finds oneself thinking of the case of George Stanislaukas, who asked for permission to change his name to Sprague. Some twenty years later, Sprague petitioned the Chicago court for leave to change his name back to Stanislaukas. He said his friends made fun of him, persisted in calling him Stanislaukas anyhow, and simply couldn't pronounce Sprague.